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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000395

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SUBJECT: YOUTH ACTIVISM DECLINING ABSENT UNIFYING NATIONAL
EVENTS

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

1. (C) At a recent meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, youth leaders listed fear, GOB propaganda, and general complacency with the quality of life in Belarus as the main reasons for the decline in youth activism. Indifferent to contrived political maneuvers such as the opposition,s upcoming congress, the leaders claimed that only elections or an economic crisis could attract a significant amount of youth interest at this point. However, in an attempt to better coordinate activities, the youth leaders are exploring the possibility of creating a youth coalition separate from the established United Democratic Forces. End summary.

Fear, Complacency, and Propaganda Stymie Youth Activism

2. (C) During a breakfast hosted by Pol/Econ Chief, representatives from opposition youth group Malady Front (MF) and youth wings of political parties overwhelmingly lamented youths' lack of interest in joining groups promoting democratic change in Belarus. Only MF spokesman Boris Goretskiy,s organization could boast an increase in membership this year. MF has grown despite obstacles such as increased GOB harassment, prosecution of several of its and the lack of a national unifying event.

3. (C) Former political prisoner Sergey Skrebets listed fear of losing jobs and education benefits in addition to intimidation by the BKGB as the major deterrents prohibiting high levels of anti-regime youth activism. United Civic Party (UCP) Youth Wing Chair Tatyana Dedok added that the youths' relative satisfaction with their quality of life in Belarus)- reasonable salaries, student stipends, education benefits)- also contributes to the decline in activism following the 2006 presidential election. Chair of the Lenin Communist Union of Youth Dmitriy Yanenko commented that the GOB,s tight control over the media keeps youth ill- or misinformed about life outside of Belarus and about real alternatives to the current regime, thus making it harder to attract them to join a movement for change.

4. (C) Most of the representatives predicted that national elections would motivate and unite the youth, although there was debate over whether the parliamentary elections next year would attract significant youth attention or whether the opposition would have to wait until the presidential elections in 2011. They agreed that an economic crisis could serve as a catalyst to raise youth activism, noting that the current troubling economic indicators caused by higher energy prices are not enough.

Youth Are Indifferent Towards the Opposition,s Congress

15. (C) The youth representatives were ambivalent about the opposition,s upcoming congress. Unlike the congress before the presidential elections where the opposition selected a single candidate, the leaders did not believe there was a clear reason for the opposition to hold the congress scheduled for May 26-27. However, the group conceded that if the congress served to at least unify the opposition and consolidate actions and opinions, then it served some purpose. A congress could also reiterate to the regime that an opposition exists, is active, and is willing and unafraid to work towards its goals.

Youth to Create Its Own Coalition?

16. (C) When Pol/Econ Chief inquired about the possibility of left and right youth parties working together, Yanenko described new steps by youth groups to consolidate their power apart from the already established opposition United Democratic Forces. Yanenko told Pol/Econ Chief that representatives from the youth wings of all the major opposition parties and from youth NGOs, including MF, Studentcheskaya Dumka, and the Flash Mob group, recently met in Lithuania to discuss coordinating and consolidating their activities. Upon returning to Belarus, the participants plan to organize a committee to hold a founding congress for the formation of a youth coalition (septel).

Next Steps for the Youth Groups

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17. (C) With summer vacation starting next month, the representatives told Pol/Econ Chief that the majority of their upcoming projects are scheduled for the fall. MF plans to work on strengthening its regional structures, while the UCP youth wing will focus on obtaining official registration. Yanenko noted that the Communist youth will launch an information campaign to advertise the results of the congress, while Skrebets plans to hold a series of rock concerts in neighboring countries to demonstrate support for Belarusian political prisoners.

Comment

18. (C) The formation of a youth coalition would be an encouraging step towards promoting democratic change in Belarus. However, even the youth activists recognize that a united youth coalition is still far off and the complacency and fears of many of the youth remain formidable obstacles, especially given the absence of unifying national events, such as presidential elections or economic crises.

19. (C) Malady Front,s secret to success -) i.e., growing membership base despite unrelenting GOB harassment -) seems to be the organization,s willingness to support any and all opposition demonstrations without consideration of partisan or ideological persuasion and its efforts to build the capacity of its regional structures. Unfortunately, youth groups like Malady Front are a rare and precious commodity in Belarus, opposition movement.

Moore